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Role of the U.S. In Persian Gulf: How It Evolved

Saudis' Aid Request Led to a New Policy in Area

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 11 — Late in the evening on Sept. 28, the Central Intelligence Agency received an urgent message from its station chief in Saudi Arabia saying that Saudi leaders, anxious about a possible attack from Iran, wanted prompt American military help.

With the conflict between Iran and Iraq threatening to increase, that Friday night request triggered a series of weekend meetings in which President Carter's military and foreign policy advisers debated, sometimes heatedly, several alternatives for dispatching air and naval forces to Saudi Arabia.

The alternatives raised basic questions about the United States' military commitment to the Saudis, about its involvement in the Persian Gulf conflict, and about Soviet attitudes toward an American buildup near the fighting.

Closer Saudi Collaboration Seen

The immediate result of the deliberations was seemingly limited to the publicized decision, announced Sept. 29, to send four radar warning planes to Saudi Arabia. But in the view of participants, the debate, a more far-reaching consequence may turn out to be closer military collaboration with the Saudis.

Last January, in the so-called Carter Doctrine, the President declared that the United States was prepared to use military force to protect oil supplies in the Persian Gulf from outside threats. But the United States, in responding to Saudi Arabia's concern over becoming embroiled in the Iranian-Iraqi war, may have gone a step further in raising the possibility of injecting American mili-

tary power in internal regional conflicts to assure a continued flow of oil.

Although two weeks have passed since that crucial series of meetings, the debate is still generating controversy. Defense Secretary Harold Brown and Zbigniew Brzezinski, the White House national security adviser, are known to believe that the American actions have enhanced the credibility of President Carter's earlier promise to protect vital Western interests in the Persian Gulf.

But Secretary of State Edmund S. Muskie and his aides, concerned about Arab sensitivities and about maintaining the neutrality of both Moscow and Washington in the Iranian-Iraqi conflict, are said to be wary of the United States' becoming too deeply involved.

A number of participants in the discussion agreed to be interviewed on the condition that they were not identified. They disclosed the following:

¶The dispatch of the radar planes was the minimum military response under consideration. All the officials agreed on this aspect, but consideration was also given to the sending of advanced F-14 and F-15 fighter planes to protect Saudi oil facilities against any Iranian air strikes. In addition, officials discussed the stationing of several hundred American military technicians to operate Hawk antiaircraft missile batteries.

¶Consideration of the Saudi request was overshadowed by concern that Iraq was about to launch attacks against Iran from Oman and Saudi Arabia. President Carter asked that the two countries be discouraged from becoming so involved.

¶The United States' prompt response is thought to have bolstered its prestige in Saudi Arabia. It is possible that the Saudis would not have agreed to increase their oil production had the United States spurned their appeal.

¶The meetings highlighted differences among Mr. Carter's advisers. Mr. Muskie seemed more concerned about maintaining diplomatic credibility with Moscow, while Mr. Brown and Mr. Brzezinski focused on the long-term strategy for building up American forces in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.

U.S. Lacks Leverage on Two Sides

When the Iraqi-Iranian conflict broke out on Sept. 22, after weeks of minor clashes, the United States' policy was one of neutrality. Lacking any leverage in either country, the United States looked to a quick end to the fighting and to limiting its possible spread. High priority was also given to keeping the Soviet Union from increasing its influence in the area.

Consequently, the Administration decided to avoid any show of force. An American naval fleet, consisting of two carrier battle groups, stayed in the Arabian Sea, while diplomats urged Arabs and other nations, including the Soviet Union, to exercise restraint and to press the belligerents to accept a cease-fire.

Officials were particularly concerned how Moscow might exploit the situation, either by moving closer to Iraq or by gaining a foothold in Iran if it were defeated. By coincidence, Mr. Muskie had a long-scheduled meeting with Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko of the Soviet Union in New York on Sept. 25.

Pledge of Soviet Nonintervention

The occasion was used to gain a pledge of nonintervention by the superpowers in the conflict. Mr. Muskie is said to have told Mr. Gromyko that it was in both countries' interests to adopt a hands-off policy. Mr. Gromyko reportedly gave the Secretary of State a message from Leonid I. Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, affirming a policy of nonintervention.

As a result of the meeting, there was no special urgency on Friday, Sept. 26, when Mr. Carter and his advisers held a regular weekly meeting over breakfast. That afternoon, in fact, Mr. Muskie flew to Kennebunk, Me., for the weekend.

But late that night, Mr. Brzezinski received a telephone call at his home in McLean, Va., from the White House situation room, the crisis center in the west wing basement, passing on a message from Adm. Stansfield Turner, Director of Central Intelligence. Admiral Turner reported that Saudi officials feared an imminent attack on Saudi oilfields by Iranian fighters.

The Saudis were alarmed because they had allowed some Iraqi planes to land on their airfields and had permitted other Iraqi planes to fly through their airspace to Oman. The Iranians had warned publicly that they might retaliate against any country aiding Iraq.

Saudi Request Was Not Specific

In the message received by the C.I.A., the Saudis not only asked for help but indicated that they were prepared to take action if necessary against Iran.

Mr. Brzezinski immediately called an early morning meeting on Saturday of second-level officials to prepare an agenda for another meeting later in the day of senior officials. At 8 A.M. he called Mr. Brown and Warren M. Christopher, the Deputy Secretary of State, who was in charge while Mr. Muskie was in Maine, to brief them on the situation.

The Saudi message, sent through intelligence channels, was not a formal note and was vague on what specific steps the United States should take. At the early morning session, officials therefore assembled a range of options.

At a minimum, officials agreed, the radar planes were the best choice for bolstering Saudi defenses. Such planes had been dispatched to Saudi Arabia once before, in March 1979, during a conflict between Yemen and the Southern Yemen.

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Some Favored Other Measures

This time there was also support from the Pentagon and from staff aides of the National Security Council for additional measures. These included the dispatch to Saudi Arabia of two F-14 squadrons, about 40 planes, from the carrier Eisenhower in the Arabian Sea and, from the United States, a similar number of F-15's as well as advanced Hawk air defense missile batteries with American crews.

Some military officers saw in the situation an opportunity to gain Saudi assent to earlier American proposals for closer military cooperation. The Pentagon had been pressing the Saudis to allow the stockpiling of equipment at air bases that could be used by American forces in the event of a major war in the area. The Saudis, while supporting the United States' efforts to strengthen its military presence elsewhere in the area, had been wary of such direct collaboration.

While aides assembled possible options to aid Saudi Arabia, senior officials had to confront another urgent matter. American and British intelligence reported that Iraqi helicopters and planes were preparing to use facilities in Oman and possibly Saudi Arabia to attack bases in Iran across the Persian Gulf and on three Iranian-held islands.

Senior Officials Hold Meeting

That afternoon at the White House, Mr. Brown, Mr. Brzezinski, Mr. Christopher and senior military and intelligence officers gathered for their first meeting on the Saudi request and the potential Iraqi moves. According to participants, the options for aiding Saudi Arabia were reviewed but no decisions were taken.

The State Department seemed unhappy with any major involvement, a position that annoyed White House and Pentagon aides. However, there was agreement on the need to respond to the Iraqi threat by seeking to persuade Oman and Saudi Arabia not to cooperate in any Iraqi action against Iran.

Mr. Carter, who was at Camp David, agreed to such a diplomatic effort. He also approved a recommendation to ask the Saudis to be specific about their needs. By coincidence, Gen. David Jones, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was in Saudi Arabia on a visit, and he and Ambassador John C. West were asked to speak with the Saudis.

The President, when informed by Mr. Brzezinski of the initial discussion, ordered one radar plane sent to Britain so that it would be closer to Saudi Arabia if and when a decision was made to dispatch the planes. The first plane reached Britain on Monday morning.

Muskie Briefed by Christopher

Meanwhile, Mr. Christopher briefed Mr. Muskie by phone on the crises that had developed and told him that another meeting had been scheduled for Sunday afternoon to resolve differences. Mr. Muskie said he would return to Washington.

Shortly before noon on Sunday, Mr. Muskie met at the State Department with Mr. Christopher and other aides to be "brought up to speed," in his words. Mr. Muskie regarded the afternoon meeting at the White House as a critical test because it was his first crisis since taking over as Secretary in May.

At 5 P.M. Mr. Brzezinski, wearing worn corduroy pants and a flannel shirt, Mr. Brown, in a jogging suit, and Mr. Muskie, in a suit and vest, gathered to thrash out differences over the Saudi request. It was agreed that it would not be appropriate, as some military officers had urged, to push the Saudis into longer-term commitments at this time.

However, there were differences over the opportunities and risks of sending forces to Saudi Arabia. Mr. Brown and Mr. Brzezinski, who have worked together closely and are versed on the technical questions involved, are said to have argued that the United States needed to demonstrate the credibility of its commitment to protect oil supplies.

Muskie Posed 'Socratic' Questions

Mr. Muskie, who admits to being "the new boy" in the Administration and is cautious about making decisions, asked what a participant called "Socratic" questions about American interests in the region.

"He asked questions like 'What should we be doing in the area,'" an official said. "He acted like a Senator. There's no way an ex-Senator can act differently very soon."

Mr. Muskie is said to have taken this tack because he was concerned what the impact of a major military move might have on professed American neutrality in the conflict and on how the Soviet Union might perceive the situation.

In the meeting, he said he did not want to do anything that might be inconsistent with what he had told Mr. Gromyko just a few days earlier. "We have enough lack of credibility with respect to each other not to add to it," Mr. Muskie was reported to have said.

The meeting concluded, after heated exchanges, with a tentative agreement that, while the United States needed to demonstrate its concern for Saudi security, it would be a mistake to introduce any offensive military systems.

Radar Planes Seen as Ideal Means

The radar planes appeared as the ideal means of assuring the Saudis while not provoking the Soviet Union. Mr. Brown and Mr. Brzezinski accepted this approach, in part, because naval officials reported that in the event of an actual attack on Saudi Arabia, F-14's from the carrier Eisenhower could be flown to the scene in less than two hours.

Following the meeting, Mr. Brzezinski reported to the President, who ordered a meeting of the National Security Council for 8 A.M. Monday. Concurrently, General Jones and Ambassador West, in Saudi Arabia, were told to obtain a formal request for the radar planes as well as Saudi agreement that the dispatch of the planes could be made public.

At the Monday meeting, intelligence officers reported that the threat of an Iraqi attack from Oman and Saudi Arabia had passed because Iraq had withdrawn its planes. A formal decision to send the radar planes was taken by Mr. Carter and was announced after Congressional leaders were briefed later in the day at the White House.

Reviewing the events, a Pentagon official said that, in the short term, the radar-plane decision "discouraged the Iranians from acting out of desperation" and "demonstrated our commitment to the Saudis." In the longer term, he said, the quick response "opens the door to much more extensive military collaboration with the Saudis."

'Mindless Gravitation' by Arabs

A White House official said the decision "stopped a mindless gravitation" by Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries in the Persian Gulf toward Iraq. He contended that the United States was now "in a much better position to move ahead on building a security framework for Southwest Asia."

But the decision has also left the State Department convinced that caution had to be followed. Mr. Muskie's aides contend that his concern about neutrality and not provoking the Soviet Union had resulted in the consensus to send the radar planes only.

There are also questions about American involvement on Capitol Hill. While noting that members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved Mr. Carter's decision, a Senate aide said the decision would have normally provoked a larger debate had it not coincided with the recess for the elections.

The aide said that the 1974 War Powers Act required formal Congressional notification whenever American military forces were sent into areas where imminent hostilities were expected. The Administration advised Congress that sending the radar planes did not require activating the war powers legislation.